

For Immediate Release
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Retiree Goes “Back to School” to Help Kids Become Better Readers

Vancouver, Washington—Tom Agnew spent 28 years as a school counselor in Virginia, but these days you can find him recruiting volunteers and drumming up support for a reading program at Minnehaha Elementary School in Vancouver.

As a VISTA member, Agnew works to make sure that the school’s Learning Center has the resources it needs to provide one-on-one tutoring to struggling readers. That can mean everything from asking local businesses to volunteer as “reading buddies” to getting raffle prizes and donated food for family literacy nights. “In my previous position I had a lot of authority,” says Tom, who holds a Ph.D. “Now I’m the low person on the stick and I’ve learned from that. I appreciate that everyone has to work together if we’re going to help kids. It’s strengthened my resolve that the community has to be involved in schools.”

Tom is a recent transplant to Vancouver, where his grandchildren live. He decided to join VISTA as a way to get to know his new home. Like Tom, many older people are finding that joining national service organizations such as VISTA or AmeriCorps is a way to stay involved in the community, develop new skills, and make new friendships. National service members serve one year and receive a small monthly stipend, which can help supplement retirement income. Many members find that the big rewards of service come in helping others.

The Washington Reading Corps (WRC), which sponsors Tom’s program, is looking for more folks who would like to share their skills and experience through national service. WRC uses AmeriCorps members in “direct service”: as tutors who work with children in small groups and individually to improve reading. VISTA members focus on “program sustainability,” which means working to make sure the program has the tools and structure needed for long-term survival. To find out more about WRC and national service, contact Mary Smith at 360-222-5555.